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indignant. She got me off in a corner and cruelly informed me that I hadn't the vestige of a backbone. She must have said something to her mother too; for when evening came round I had to move back into my own room, Mrs. Titus sweetly assuring me that under no consideration would she consent to impose upon my good nature and hospitality to such an extent, etc., etc.

During the day, at odd times, Colingraft made lofty suggestions in regard to what could be done with the place to make it more or less inhabitable, and Jasper said he'd just like to have a whack at the thing himself. First thing he'd do would be to turn some of those old, unused rooms into squash and racket courts, and he'd also put in a swimming pool and a hot water plant.

SHORTLY after breakfast next morning Mrs. Titus came downstairs smartly gowned for the street. She announced that she was going into town for an hour or two, and asked me to have one of the Schmicks ferry her across the river. There was a famous antique shop there, and she wanted to browse awhile in search of brasses and bronzes.

I looked at her aghast. I recognized the crisis; but for a moment was unable to marshal my powers of resistance. Noting my consternation, she calmly assured me that there wouldn't be the least danger of detection, as she was going to be heavily veiled and very cautious.

"My dear Mrs. Titus," I murmured in my dismay, "it isn't to be considered. I am sure you won't persist in this when I tell you that Tarnowsky's agents are sure to see you and—"

She laughed. "Tarnowsky's agents! Why should they be here?"

"They seem to be everywhere."

"I can assure you there is none within fifty miles of Schloss Rothhoefer. Our men are in the city. Four of them preceded me. This morning I had Mr. Bangs telephone to the hotel where the chief operative is staying,—in the guise of an American tourist, and he does it very cleverly for an Englishman too,—and he assures me that there is absolutely no danger. Even Mr. Bangs is satisfied."

"I am forced to say that I am by no means satisfied that it is a safe or wise thing to do, Mrs. Titus," I said, with more firmness than I thought I possessed.

She raised her delicate eyebrows in a most exasperating, well bred, admonitory way. "I am quite sure, Mr. Smart, that Dillingham is a perfectly trustworthy detective, and—"

"But why take the slightest risk?"

"It is necessary for me to see Dillingham, that is the long and short of it," she said coldly. "One can't discuss things over a telephone, you know. And, by the way, Mr. Smart, I have taken the liberty of calling up the central office of the telephone company to ask if they can run an extension wire to my dressing room. I hope you do not mind."

"Not in the least. I should have thought of it myself."

"You have so much to think of, poor man! And now will you be good enough to order the man to row me across the—"

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Titus," said I firmly, "but I fear I must declare myself. I cannot permit you to go into town today."

She was thunderstruck. "Are you in earnest?" she cried, after searching my face rather intently for a moment.

"Unhappily, yes. Will you let me explain—"

"The idea!" she exclaimed as she drew herself up to her full height and withered me with a look of surpassing scorn. "Am I to regard myself as a prisoner, Mr. Smart? I have never known anything so absurd." Two bright red spots appeared in her cheeks. "Your attitude is most extraordinary. However, I will go to the city this morning, Mr. Smart. Pray give me the credit of having sense enough to— Ah, Colingraft."

The two sons approached from the breakfast room. Colingraft, noting his mother's attire, accelerated his speed and was soon beside us.

"Going out, Mother?" he inquired, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"If Mr. Smart will be good enough to withdraw his opposition," she said icily.

He gave me a sharp look. "What's up?"

"Mrs. Titus doesn't seem to realize the risk she runs in—"

"Risk? Do you suppose, Mr. Smart, I would jeopardize my daughter's—"

"What's up?" repeated Colingraft.

"Mr. Smart calmly informs me that I am not to go into the city."

"I don't see that Mr. Smart has anything to say about it," said her son coolly. "If he—"

"One moment, Mr. Titus," I said, setting my jaw. "I have this to say about it. You

are guests in my house. We are jointly interested in the effort to protect Countess Tarnowsky. I consider it to be the height of imprudence for any member of your family to venture into the city, now or at any time during her stay in this castle. I happen to know that Tarnowsky is having me watched for some purpose or other. I don't think he suspects the Countess is here; but I greatly fear that he believes I am interested in her cause. Mrs. Titus says that the man Dillingham assures her there is no danger. Well, I can only say that Dillingham is a fool, and I don't purpose having my own safety threatened by—"

"Your safety?" exclaimed he. "I like that! What have you to be afraid of?"

"You seem to forget that I am harboring a fugitive from justice," I said flatly.

Mrs. Titus gasped. "How dare you—"

"Countess Tarnowsky is wanted by the authorities for kidnapping, and I think you know the facts as well as I do," I went on harshly. "God knows I am doing my best to protect her! I am risking more than you seem to appreciate. If she is found here, my position isn't likely to be an enviable one. I am not thinking solely of myself, believe me; but after all I contend that I have a right to assert myself in a crisis that may affect me vitally. I trust you will see my position and act accordingly; with consideration, if nothing else."

Mrs. Titus did not take her eyes off mine while I was speaking. There was an expression of utter amazement in them. "I fear you exaggerate the extent of your peril, Mr. Smart," she said dryly. "Of course, I have no desire to put you in jeopardy; but it seems to me—"

"Leaving me out of the case altogether, don't you think it is a bit unfair to the Countess?" I asked in some heat. "She doesn't want to go to jail."

"Jail!" she cried angrily.

"That's no way to speak about—" began Colingraft furiously.

I broke in rashly. "If you please, Mr. Titus, be good enough to keep your temper. I have no desire to appear harsh and arbitrary; but I can see that it is necessary to speak plainly. There isn't anything in the world I will not do to help you and the Countess in this unfortunate business, Mr. Titus. I am her friend; I want to be yours if you will let me. But I reserve the right to say what shall be and shall not be done as long as you are under my roof. Just a moment, Mr. Titus! I think we are quite agreed that your sister is to depart from this castle on the fourteenth of the month. I am to be her escort, so to speak, for a considerable distance, in company with Bangs. Well, it must be clearly understood that not one of you is to show his or her face outside these walls until after that journey is over."

"I will go where I please, and I'll go to the town today!" roared Colingraft.

"If you, or any of you, put a foot outside these walls," I declared, "you will not be allowed to reenter. That's flat!"

"By cricky!" fell in fervent admiration from the lips of Jasper, Jr. I glanced at his beaming, astonished face. "Good for you! You're a wonder, Mr. Smart! By cricky! And you're dead right. We're darn fools!"

"Jasper!" gasped Mrs. Titus. "Colingraft, please take me to my room. Send for Aline. Ask Mr. Bangs to come to me at once."

I bowed stiffly. "I am sorry, Mrs. Titus, to have been so harsh, so assertive—"

She held up both hands. "I never was so spoken to in all my life, Mr. Smart. I shall not forget it to my dying day."

She walked away from me, her pretty head held high and her chin suspiciously aquiver. Colingraft hastened after her, but not without giving me a stare in which rage and wonder struggled for the mastery.

"Gee!" said Jasper. "You've corked her, all right, all right!" He followed me into the study, and I couldn't get rid of him for hours.

Later in the forenoon the Countess, with a queer little smile on her lips, told me that her mother considered me the most wonderful, the most forceful, character she had ever encountered.

To be continued next Sunday

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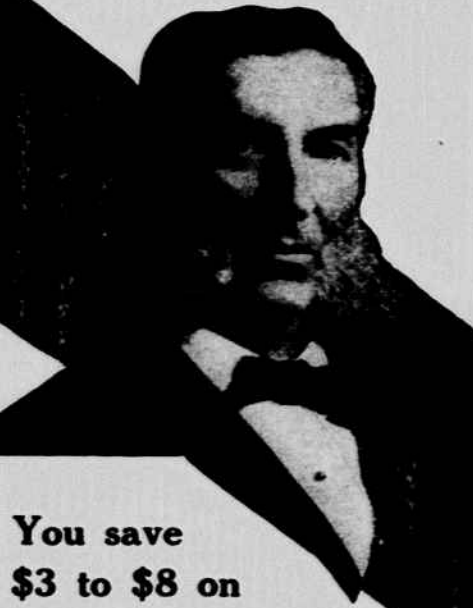
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